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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002983

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SUBJECT: PUTIN ASKS SERBS FOR AHTISAARI ALTERNATIVE

REF: BELGRADE 00813

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reasons: 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During the June visits of Serbian Prime Minister Kostunica and FM Jeremic, Putin apparently pushed them to come up with a counterproposal on Kosovo that he can carry to Kennebunkport. The GOR, however, remains committed to a solution based on a "compromise" between the parties, providing little grounds for optimism that Russia is crafting a creative way forward. Meanwhile, Russian economic ties with Serbia continue to expand, with more business delegations heading to Belgrade shortly. End Summary

No Russian Promises, but Push for a Plan

¶2. (C) In a June 19 meeting, Serbian DCM Yelica Kuryak told us that the Russian leadership had stopped short of promising a veto at the UN Security Council, while making their opposition to the Ahtisaari plan clear. Kuryak, who attended Jeremic's June 6 meeting with Lavrov, said the Russian Foreign Minister delivered "nothing new," but briefed on the visit of the Secretary and the outcome of the G8 Summit discussions on Kosovo, and reiterated Russia's opposition to a new resolution endorsing Ahtisaari in the absence of Serbian buy-in. Lavrov commented that if the draft resolution were put to a vote, "it will be bad for all of us."

¶3. (C) During the June 9 Kostunica-Putin meeting, there was no promise of a Russian veto; however, Putin reportedly pushed Kostunica for a "concrete proposal" that he could share with the President at their July 2 meeting in Kennebunkport. Putin complained that the GOR could no longer deal in abstractions regarding the future of Kosovo, and urged Kostunica to be specific. Putin and Kostunica apparently concurred that extending the negotiating period between Kosovars and Serbs, if combined with automaticity on Kosovo's independence at the end of a new UNSCR timeframe, would be "meaningless and insulting." The two leaders agreed that the prospect of unilateral action by the West was not in the interests of Serbia or Russia, with Putin reportedly stressing that the GOR would not be able to resist taking reciprocal steps on Abkhazia.

¶4. (C) Kuryak noted that the MFA has requested a bilateral between Putin and President Tadic, on the margins of a June 24 energy forum in Croatia.

MFA: Compromise at Core of Resolution

¶5. (C) MFA Third European Deputy Director (Balkans) Andrey Yermolenko confirmed that GOR officials reviewed broad Russian concerns over the Ahtisaari plan with the visiting Serbian officials and reiterated that the GOR's main problem with the Sarkozy proposal was its "automaticity." The

six-month delay in resolving status would give the parties "one last chance" to reach an accommodation, but Moscow could not accept an imposed solution, regardless of the elapsed time. Yermolenko would not be drawn out as to what factors would lead the parties to an agreement when this had proved impossible over the past 18 months. He urged the U.S. not to take any precipitate steps before the presidents met at Kennebunkport, stressing that there was a "chance for progress" during the July 2 bilateral discussions.

¶6. (C) Observing that Russia could live with any settlement Serbia accepted, Yermolenko pointed the finger at the EU for the stalemate over status, because it had not offered Serbia real prospects for integration. The Serbian leadership's inability to offer its public a solid vision of a European future limited its already restricted room for maneuver. In his view, Serbia played the central role in the Balkans and the EU could not realistically contemplate a Union "with a hole in the middle of it." At the same time, there was no figure in Europe who had an interest in pushing forward Serbia's integration. Without this push, nothing would be done because particular interests, such as the apprehension of war criminals, would trump a more strategic view of Serbia's role.

Russian Business and Orthodox Church Rush In

¶7. (C) Kuryak, a Tadic protg and a lonely figure among her Milosevic-era Embassy staff, reiterated her concern that Serbia's failure to move beyond the issue of Kosovo was being deftly exploited by the GOR and Russian business. She noted that Emergency Situations Minister Shoygu would travel to Belgrade on June 21 to discuss investments, followed by a

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large Russian business delegation on June 25. Aeroflot, the Sheremetevo Airport Authority, and Gazprom were among the business interests represented. Aeroflot, in particular, had adopted a more "aggressive" posture in seeking to purchase the Serbian national airline. Yermolenko confirmed that there was increasing Russian business interest in Serbia; this extended beyond energy to include infrastructure projects. Kuryak also described a higher profile among Russian Orthodox Church leaders, who are using the non-governmental Society for the Friendship of Nations to promote cultural ties, language instruction, and exchange programs.

New (Kosovo) Serb Ambassador Arrives

¶8. (C) After a long delay, Serbia's new Ambassador arrived in Moscow on June 17. Kuryak describes Stanimir Vukicevic, a Serbian native of Kosovo, as a classic nationalist, in the Milosevic mold. Persuaded by Tadic to remain another year, and with FM Jeremic instructing Vukicevic to maintain an even keel with his liberal deputy, Kuryak appeared resigned to the Embassy becoming a platform for advocating Serbian grievances. According to Kuryak, Vukicevic has been hailed by Russian conservative, Church leaders, and Duma members as a "national hero," on the basis of his Kosovo roots, and the MFA facilitated his quick presentation of papers.

Comment

¶9. (C) Whether or not Kostunica or Jeremic received iron-clad guarantees on a Russian veto has little significance, given the GOR's opposition to the Ahtisaari plan in its current form. Kuryak's readout suggests that Putin does not want to come to Kennebunkport empty-handed, yet the MFA's continued insistence on a solution based on compromise between the parties provides little grounds for optimism that Russia is crafting a creative way forwards.

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